DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 993 CS 212 263

AUTHOR	Howley, Craig B.
TITLE	Handbook for Writing School Newsletters.
INSTITUTION	Appalachia Educational Lab., Charleston, W. Va.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	87
NOTE	27p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc., P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325 ($4.00).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Audience Awareness; Elementary Secondary Education; *Expository Writing; *Newsletters; Parent School Relationship; *School Publications; Writing Exercises; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS	Stylistics

ABSTRACT

This handbook, written for a workshop, is designed to help improve school newsletters. The first section of the handbook is an outline of the lecture given in the workshop. Subsequent sections discuss and illustrate: (1) basic principles of simple, functional writing; (2) the importance of time and practice; (3) five good writing habits; (4) useful alternatives to wordy phrases; (5) readability; and (6) two exercises to improve writing and editing. Finally, the last section of the handbook presents six models of simple, functional writing. Three of the models presented illustrate good writing for elementary school newsletters. The directory's appendix takes a close look at the process of revising and editing. (RS)

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About This Handbook

This is a handbook to help improve school newsletters. There are two places to begin work, and the workshop for which this handbook is written deals with both.

First, there are the **big issues**: deciding on the mission and scope of your newsletter, developing the procedures for handling text for the newsletter, and locating sources for articles. Then there are the **small, but important issues**. These issues concern writing: making articles mechanically correct, clear, readable, and interesting to parents.

Putting out a newsletter is not the principal's biggest responsibility, but research suggests that parents *like* newsletters. Even if you can use only a few suggestions from the workshop, they will have an effect that people notice.

The first section of the handbook is an outline of the lecture given in the workshop. Subsequent sections discuss and illustrate (1) basic principles of simple, functional writing; (2) the importance of time and practice; (3) five good writing habits; (4) useful alternatives to wordy phrases; (5) readability; and (6) two exercises to improve writing and editing.

Finally, the last sections of the handbook give you *six models of simple, functional writing*. Three of the models illustrate good writing for elementary school newsletters. Study these models. According to research, following a model is one of the most effective ways to develop your writing skills. The appendix takes a close look at the *process* of revising and editing.

LECTURE: An Overview of Writing for School Newsletters

A. Newsletter copy

1. What is it?
   a. successive drafts of words that serve a particular function
2. What is its function?
   a. to help parents make sense of children's school experience (more on "scope" below)

B. Developing newsletter copy

1. Constraints on selection of words (producing copy is editing)
   a. characteristics of parents
   b. scope of newsletter (simple to complex)
      (1) report
      (2) inform
      (3) explain
   c. size of newsletter
   d. time available to produce newsletter
   e. verbal skills of staff who will develop newsletter
2. Sources of copy (depends on scope of newsletter)
   a. journals, magazines, other newsletters
   b. central office
   c. parents
   d. in-house: teachers, administrators, other staff, students, volunteers
3. Caring for copy
   a. Make it readable: informal, to the point.
   b. Make it presentable: positive, proactive, productive.
   c. Edit everything at least 3 times (minimum).
   d. Make proofreader a separate person from writer

C. Summary

1. Plan your articles & your newsletter.
2. Use a system to produce good copy.
3. Craft your words to your audience.
4. Be *very careful* about editing and proofreading.

Basic Principles for Simple, Functional Writing

When writers put in the time required to do a good job, they can attend to the following principles of good writing:

- Make sentences short.
- Use simple words instead of fancy words (avoid jargon).
- Organize words within sentences (wordprocessing helps).
- Organize sentences within paragraphs (word-processing helps).
- Organize paragraphs within articles (word-processing helps).
- Re-read (when you edit) from the audience's point of view (*not easy*).

Sometimes inexperienced writers are puzzled by the term *organization*. Try thinking of organization as the order of words, sentences, and paragraphs. When you write, you make choices about order. Wordprocessing is a tool that makes it easy to improve the organization of an article. It eliminates laborious re-typing, and it allows you to experiment with the order of words, sentences, and paragraphs, because it is so easy to make changes. Handling newsletter copy is a perfect application for wordprocessing.

The last point--re-read from your audience's point of view--is the *guiding principle* of editing; all the other principles are part of it. As you edit, you need to be two people at once: yourself and your intended reader. As yourself, you keep track of your values and (more mundanely) your grammar; as your intended reader, you keep track of the purpose of the article and the interests and knowledge of the audience.

In *both* modes, you try to cultivate a presentation (diction, style, and structure) that your audience can identify with. To deal with this kind of, well, schizophrenic perspective, you might try reading your work aloud to hear how it would sound to your intended readers. Is this really the kind of thing you would say in person? Does it get your point across clearly?

Practice, Available Time, and Quality

Good writing is very hard work. The principles of simple, functional writing are easy to state, but surprisingly difficult to put into effective practice. *Practice* is the key word.

Time is of the essence. A good writer, hard at work, can produce a double-spaced typewritten page of *draft* text (about 250 words) in an hour. A less-practiced writer can do the same job in two or three hours.

Writing, editing, and proofreading a four-page newsletter *should* take most teachers and principals about 10 or 15 hours of work. Getting the copy ready to print might require another one to two hours. Improvements in writing quality take time, from issue to issue, and from word to word.

You need to spend more time on your newsletter than you would on an assignment of equal length for a graduate class. Your newsletter is, after all, a public event. Don't be caught with your modifiers dangling, or with verbs that disagree with their subjects.

How frequently you issue a newspaper should have something to do with the amount of time available for the work. If available time is a problem and you want to improve your newsletter, then you should consider reducing its length or issuing it less frequently. Don't, however, stop publishing your newsletter if time is a problem. Remember that even small improvements accumulate over time.

Five Good Writing Habits

These examples use the alternatives to wordy phrases and jargon listed in the next section.

1. **Make direct statements.** Beware of phrases like "there is" or "it is." Usually you can eliminate the phrase–just state what you mean. *FOR EXAMPLE:*

Poor– "It is a good idea to make a quiet time for study."
Better– "Set aside a quiet time for study."

2. **Use the active voice** whenever you can. The active voice names an actor, someone responsible for doing or saying something. *FOR EXAMPLE:*

Poor– "Results of the needs assessment will be distributed to parents." (passive voice: "will be distributed")
Better– "The school will send the results of the study to parents." (active voice: "school will send")

3. **Use adjectives** or prepositional phrases to modify nouns. Avoid using nouns to modify other nouns. Strings of nouns are hard to read. *FOR EXAMPLE:*

Poor– "Your proposal abstract was reviewed by three independent persons knowledgeable in the topical area."
Better–"Three experts in your field reviewed the abstract of your proposal."

4. **Use conjunctions** (and, or) to join nouns or phrases. Don't use the slash ("/"). A slash creates an expression that is vague and difficult to interpret. *FOR EXAMPLE:*

Poor– "Our annual potluck dinner/meet the staff social hour was a great success."
Better– "Parents and teachers liked our potluck dinner."

5. **Use language that is not biased.** Avoid expressions that are tainted with racism or sexism. Don't use the construction "he/she." Use plural forms and rewrite the sentence to avoid "he/she." This trick takes practice. *FOR EXAMPLE:*

Poor– "If your child is sick, keep him home."
Better– "Keep sick children home."

Poor– "A child with a learning disability deserves special help. He/she has special needs."
Better– "Children with learning disabilities deserve special help. They have special needs."

Poor– "We'd like to thank all our homeroom mothers."
Better– "We'd like to thank the parents who helped with the parties."

Alternatives to Wordy Phrases and Jargon

Change this expression...	*To this one...*
a number of	some
achievement	grades or test scores
affective (domain)	emotion, feeling
as a means of	to
assessment	test, study
assistance	help
at the present time	now
behavior management	classroom rules, discipline
cognitive	academic, intellectual
component	part
contribute	give
curriculum	courses, classes
development	growth
disseminate	send out
due to the fact that	since
educators	teachers (if you mean only teachers)
educational professionals	teachers, educators (if you mean administrators, too)
employ	use
establish	set up, show
evaluate	judge
expertise	skill
facilitate	help
for a period of	for
for the purpose of	for
implement	carry out, do
in accordance with	by
in order that	so
interface with	meet
in the course of	during
it is essential	we must
it is recommended	we ask
language arts	reading and writing
learners	children, kids, students
limited number	few
maximize	increase
minimize	decrease
monitor	check

Change this expression...	*To this one...*
necessitate	need
needs assessment	study
notify	tell
not later than	by
objective	aim, goal, point, purpose, reason
observe	see
operational	working
prioritize	rank
provides guidance for	guides
similar to	like
social studies	history, geography
state-of-the-art	latest
substantial	strong, large, big
utilize, utilization	use
/	and, or

Readability

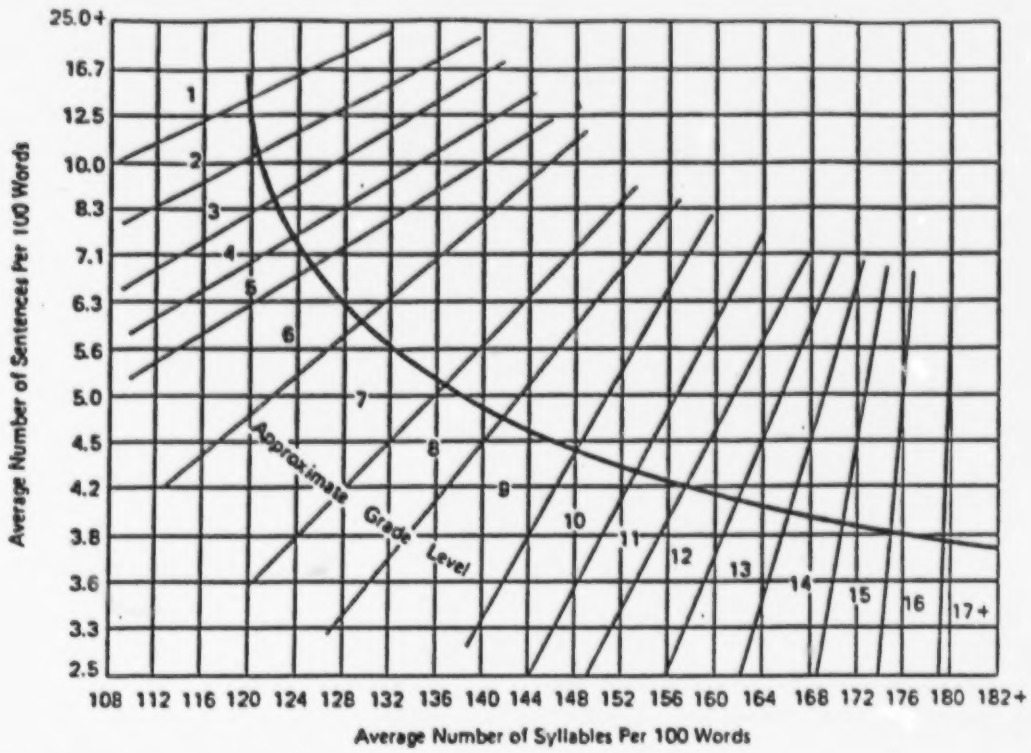
You need to keep track of the reading level in your newsletters. Articles that we looked at during the workshop had readability levels as high as grade 14 or 15.

An upper limit of fifth or sixth grade makes your newsletters accessible to most parents. Don't get the impression that simple language keeps you from writing about complex ideas. Even complex ideas can be presented simply.

For example, the passage by Bertrand Russell (included among the first set of models of simple, functional writing, below) is written at about the *seventh grade level*. Bertrand Russell was one of the most eminent philosophers of the twentieth century; if a philosopher can write simply, then anyone can! The *most complicated* model newsletter article (in the second set of models of simple, functional writing, below) is written at the third grade level.

The familiar Fry graph, together with instructions, appears on the next page. Computer programs that check readability have been published. They're not very expensive, but the Fry graph is fine for our purpose.

GRAPH FOR ESTIMATING READABILITY—EXTENDED*



Expanded Directions for Working Readability Graph

1. Randomly select three sample passages and count out exactly 100 words each, beginning with the beginning of a sentence. Count proper nouns, initializations, and numerals.
2. Count the number of sentences in 100 words, estimating length of the fraction of the last sentence to the nearest one tenth.
3. Count the total number of syllables in the 100-word passage. If you do not have a hand counter available, simply put a mark above every syllable over one in each word; then when you get to the end of the passage, count the number of marks and add 100. Small calculators can also be used as counters by pushing numeral 1, then push the + sign for each word or syllable when counting.
4. Enter graph with *average* sentence length and *average* number of syllables; plot dot where the two lines intersect. Area where dot is plotted will give you the approximate grade level.
5. If a great deal of variability is found in syllable count or sentence count, putting more samples into the average is desirable.
6. A word is defined as a group of symbols with a space on either side; thus, *Joe, IRA, 1945,* and *&* are each one word.
7. A syllable is defined as a phonetic syllable. Generally, there are as many syllables as vowel sounds. For example, *stopped* is one syllable and *wanted* is two syllables. When counting syllables for numerals and initializations, count one syllable for each symbol. For example, *1945* is four syllables, *IRA* is three syllables, and *&* is one syllable.

*This extended graph does not outmode or render the earlier (1968) version inoperative or inaccurate; it is an extension.

Source: Edward Fry, "Fry's Readability Graph: Clarifications, Validity, and Extension to Level 17," *Journal of Reading* (December 1977): 249.

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From the Ridiculous to the Sublime: *Inspirational Models of Simple, Functional Writing*

from *USA Today*

The horrible W-4 form monster has USA taxpayers scrambling for help.

H&R Block–which prepares one in 10 tax forms–had offered to do the new four-page worksheets for free from Jan. 5 to today. But marketing chief Steve Dickey said Monday the firm will extend the service to Feb. 1 because of "positive response."

from *Your Career in Teaching* (Dowdall & Dowdall, 1967)

Trends of today create the problems of tomorrow. For example, consider the trend toward urbanization. At the present time, seven out of every ten Americans live in cities. Already one sixth of the nation's population is squeezed into the supercity that extends from Norfolk, Virginia, up to Portland, Maine.

from *Education and the Good Life* (Bertrand Russell, 1926)

It is not enough that the educator should love the young; it is necessary also that he should have a right conception of human excellence. Cats teach their kittens to catch mice and play with them; militarists do likewise with the human young. The cat loves the kitten, but not the mouse; the militarist may love his own son, but not the sons of his country's enemies. Even those who love all mankind may err through a wrong conception of the good life.

[The use of *he* and *mankind* would be deemed a sexist use of language by today's standards. Note, however, that this passage was written in 1926.]

Exercises to Improve Writing and Editing

First exercise. Consider the following sentences. You have a double task; first, identify which of the five good writing habits from page 6 is violated; second, rewrite the sentence to improve it. The items are arranged from easy to more difficult. Answers, explanations, and sample rewrites appear on the following page.

1. This food will then be distributed to those in need in the area.
    a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
    b. uses the passive voice
    c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
    d. conjunctions not used effectively
    e. uses biased language

2. I believe that a loose, inconsistent attendance/tardy policy in the schools promotes absenteeism later in life.
   a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
   b. uses the passive voice
   c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
   d. conjunctions not used effectively
   e. uses biased language

3. We have many positive feelings about the first month of school.
   a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
   b. uses the passive voice
   c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
   d. conjunctions not used effectively
   e. uses biased language

4. Our annual BOOK FAIR will be held this month.
   a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
   b. uses the passive voice
   c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
   d. conjunctions not used effectively
   e. uses biased language

5. To make this fair as successful as last year's was, we are once again asking for your help.
   a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
   b. uses the passive voice
   c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
   d. conjunctions not used effectively
   e. uses biased language

6. Each teacher will chaperone her own class.
   a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
   b. uses the passive voice
   c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
   d. conjunctions not used effectively
   e. uses biased language

7. We cannot submit more shoe or boot orders until after January.
    a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
    b. uses the passive voice
    c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
    d. conjunctions not used effectively
    e. uses biased language

8. As the opening of school approaches, act and decide now to encourage a positive school year for your son or daughter.
    a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
    b. uses the passive voice
    c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
    d. conjunctions not used effectively
    e. uses biased language

9. Some students have difficulty with school-related behavior.
    a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
    b. uses the passive voice
    c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
    d. conjunctions not used effectively
    e. uses biased language

10. Room visitation will follow until 8:00 p.m.
    a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)
    b. uses the passive voice
    c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)
    d. conjunctions not used effectively
    e. uses biased language

1. This food will then be distributed to those in need in the area.

   answer: b. uses the passive voice

   explanation: "Food will be" is the passive voice; "We will distribute food" expresses the same meaning in the active voice.

   rewrite: Next, we will distribute food to needy families in our district.

2. I believe that a loose, inconsistent attendance/tardy policy in the schools promotes absenteeism later in life.

   answer: d. conjunctions not used effectively

   explanation: "Attendance/tardy" is the biggest problem, although you're also right in identifying "nounspeak" as a problem. The slash, however, is plain ugly; the nounspeak problem is more subtle.

   rewrite: I believe that poor attendance and consistent tardiness in school promotes absenteeism later in life. (Reading level too high.)

   better rewrite: I think that students who come to school late—or not at all—will act the same way as workers, later in life.

3. We have many positive feelings about the first month of school.

   answer: a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)

   explanation: The phrase "we have" could be replaced by "there are" with no change in meaning! In fact, this statement probably serves no purpose in the article from which it is taken; but let's assume it is necessary.

   rewrite: The start of a new school year is an exciting time. (On second thought, such a sentence could serve a purpose; the blandness of the original really turned me off at first.)

4. Our annual BOOK FAIR will be held this month.

   answer: b. uses the passive voice

   explanation: "Fair will be held" is the passive voice, "The PTA will hold the fair" is active voice.

   rewrite: The PTA will hold this year's book fair in April.

5. To make this fair as successful as last year's was, we are once again asking for your help.

   answer: a. not a direct statement ("there is" construction)

   explanation: This sentence is a double whammy: "as last year's was" is a "there is" construction, but the entire statement is not direct. "We are asking" is a stall tactic. Why not just ask?

   rewrite: Our book fair was a big success last year, thanks to you. Will you help again this year?

6. Each teacher will chaperone her own class.

   answer: e. uses biased language

   explanation: Yes! Maybe all the teachers are women. So what? Do you want to convey the impression (even between the lines) that only women can be elementary school teachers? Probably not.

   rewrite: Teachers will chaperone their own classes.

7. We cannot submit more shoe or boot orders until after January.

   answer: c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)

   explanation: "shoe or boot orders" uses nouns to modify "orders." We talk this way all the time, but the statement does violate the rule. There are alternatives to such usage.

   rewrite: We cannot fill more orders for shoes or boots until February.

8. As the opening of school approaches, act and decide now to encourage a positive school year for your son or daughter.

   answer: a. not a direct statement

   explanation: The big problem with the statement is that it is not direct enough. It seems direct ("act ... now"), but it's too wordy. "Son or daughter" is a distractor! I'll change it in the rewrite, but it's not really a biased use of language.

   rewrite: Help get your children ready for the new school year by letting them know that you expect them to do well.

9. Some students have difficulty with school-related behavior.

   answer: c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)

   explanation: "School-related behavior" uses an awkward adjectival phrase, derived from a noun, to modify "behavior." It's ineffective and unnecessary. It contributes to the indirectness of the statement. (If you said the statement was not direct, count your response as correct, too.)

   rewrite: Some students do not behave very well in school.

   another rewrite: Following the school rules is tough for some students.

10. Room visitation will follow until 8:00 p.m.

    answer: c. nounspeak (nouns used to modify nouns)

    explanation: "Room visitation" is such a common expression that you may not have noticed that it uses a noun to modify another noun.

    rewrite: After the meeting, parents can visit teachers until 8:00 p.m. (I'm assuming that the goal is to give parents a chance to talk to the teachers and that this goal is more important than visiting a room.)

Second exercise.

This exercise is an experiment in organization. The text is drawn from an article that appeared recently in the AEL newsletter, *The Link*.

I have, however, scrambled the order of the sentences. Your task is to organize them so they make sense, so the article flows. Now, you may not come up with exactly the order that we did. But, because the article is tightly organized, your version should be close.

In the blank to the left of the sentence, record the order (1-8) in which you would arrange the sentences to make an effective article. Also, once you have decided on the order of the sentences, note where you would divide the copy into paragraphs (the original has three paragraphs).

The original article appears on the next page.

___Teachers apply on a competitive basis for the funds at the beginning of the school year.

___This scene is typical in the school system's 23 facilities.

___It's all part of the three-year-old Expanded Learning Opportunities Program.

___Berkeley County Schools makes available to its teachers $25-36,000 per year for such programs.

___It's the end of the school day in Berkeley County, WV.

___The Division of Instruction, under the direction of Dr. Barbara Johnston, reviews the requests according to specific criteria.

___Computers are switched on, math problems go up on the blackboards, pencils are sharpened, musical instruments are tuned up.

___As the last busses leave, the classrooms continue to hum with activity.

It's the end of the school day in Berkeley County, WV. As the last busses leave, the classrooms continue to hum with activity. Computers are switched on, math problems go up on the blackboards, pencils are sharpened, musical instruments are tuned up.

This scene is typical in the school system's 23 facilities. It's all part of the three-year-old Expanded Learning Opportunities Porgram.

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Models of Excellent Newsletter Copy

(Reading Levels Computed With the Fry Graph)

1. SNOW ROUTES SET

Snow routes help keep students safe in bad weather. At last week's board meeting, school board members set the routes for this winter. The highway department still has to give its OK. As soon as they do, the board will publish the routes in the *Jefferson Herald*. We will list in the *Newsletter* the names of streets on which our school buses will travel.

(READING LEVEL: 4th grade)

2. HELPING YOUR CHILD TO READ

Every child can learn to read. Parents are a big influence on a child's reading habits. Here are some tips for helping your child.

Read aloud to your child. Make it a regular routine. Choose books that you know your child likes. Also, look for books that you think your child *might* like. The teachers at Belleville can make suggestions.

Some children like to read out loud; some don't. If your child doesn't yet read as well as other children, you need to be very patient when you listen to the child read. If you or your child becomes upset, back off.

When you are listening to a child read, keep *your* interruptions to a minimum. When a child makes a mistake, wait until the end of a sentence. Then ask, "Did that make sense?"

Using this trick does two things. First, it gives the child time to think. Second, it reminds the child that reading is supposed to make sense. Children who are having trouble learning often get the idea that reading is a hopeless jumble. They need our support to overcome this idea.

If you find that a child can't keep track of the sense, choose an easier book. Teachers can help you pick books that a child can succeed in.

Remember: we all—parents and teachers alike—influence children most strongly by example. Talk about the books you read. Children love to hear stories, and they love to know what you think about things.

When children see that we like to read, when they see that reading helps us deal with the world, they want to read, too.

(READING LEVEL: 3rd grade)

3. PUPPETEER

Kids love puppets and puppeteers. One of the best is coming to Belleville next week. For 15 years Steven Bills has used puppets and ventriloquy to amuse and to teach. His "Beauregard the Bashful Bullfrog" is a classic. Showtime is 1:15. Please come; bring your preschoolers!

(READING LEVEL: 4th or 5th grade)

Reference Works for Producing Good Copy

(ordered from essential to desirable)

Hodges, J., Whitten, M. (1984). *Harbrace college handbook* (9th ed.). New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.

Hodges and Whitten is the standard grammar, diction, and style reference in U.S. colleges and universities. Keep it on hand to check disputes about punctuation (e.g., Do introductory prepositional phrases take commas?) and word usage (e.g., When do you use *infer* instead of *imply*?).

Strunk, W., & White, E.B. (1979). *The elements of style* (3rd. ed.). New York: Macmillan. (Original work published 1959)

Strunk and White is short, to the point, and very readable. It's funny, too. It contains lots of *models*; this is not just a "do as I say" book.

Mitchell, R. (1979). *Less than words can say*. Boston: Little, Brown.

This book is not a reference work in the strict sense. It is instead a memorable essay on the abuse of language. Having read it, however, you will forever after refer to the experience when you write.

Copperud, R. (1980). *American usage and style: The consensus*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Ah! Are you suspicious that even grammarians, like educators, may dispute the essential facts of their body of knowledge? Copperud investigates the grammarians' disputes and reports the consensus. He is a kind of court-of-last-resort for the word-lover.

Appendix

What Goes on in the Head of an Editor:

Living and Breathing Chaos and Order

Revising and editing an article is complicated work; it's work that lives and breathes, and tips and techniques for doing the work can't give you much insight into the process of revising and editing. This appendix is an attempt to give you some insight into that process.

We're going to stop the process at four points to take a look at what's happening. Finally, we'll review the last draft for typos and other small errors.

A Note about Word Processing

The drafts that we will look at are really cross-sections of continuous word processing. Each successive draft shows incremental improvements, and even the final draft could be improved, if there were time.

It would, of course, be even more helpful if you could watch someone at a wordprocessor and listen to that person "think aloud." The "think aloud" process would let you see the assumptions of the editor and watch how each editing decision was made. This section of the handbook is a print-media alternative.

Critical Reading

The first step in editing and revising is to read *critically*. Try to come up with ways to make information and views more understandable to your readers.

Read *what's there* for words and phrases that you can use...

- for a good title.
- for a good lead sentence.
- as the main idea.

Read between the lines (*what's not there*) for...

- false modesty (unjustified omissions).
- taboo subjects or statements (justifiable omissions).
- omitted details that can hook a reader (oversights).

If you think this kind of critical reading is complicated, you're right! In fact, this kind of critical reading ties in with what I wrote earlier (page 4) about the *guiding principle* of editing. *Always* re-read newsletter copy from the audience's point of view.

Now, try to read the following draft critically:

First Draft: A Cry for Help

VIRGINIA CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD

During the next few months we will be participating in the Virginia Children's Book Award program. The purpose of this award program is to enrich the lives of children in grades three through six by encouraging them to read books of literary quality. Students who have read or listened to six of the nineteen selected books will be eligible to vote for their favorite book in March. Winners will be announced in April. The winning author will come to Virginia to receive the award and speak to an audience of children and adults. We have purchased a set of the selected books with PTA funds for the library. These books will be in the IMC and available to teachers and students beginning November 26.

READING LEVEL: 9th grade

Observations from Critical Reading of First Draft

I'm dividing my observations into *big issues* and *little issues* (see p. 1). These are my own views as an editor; you might very well take another, equally defensible view of the changes that need to be made. If we were working together, we'd come to a consensus that might be different from what follows.

My observations, however, are intended to illustrate the process of revision and editing. They are based on the points covered in the lecture outline (p. 3); basic principles for simple, functional writing (p. 4); five good writing habits (p. 6); alternatives to wordy phrases and jargon (p. 7); and an understanding of readability (pp. 8-9).

Big issues. These issues concern purpose, audience, and organization. The *purpose* of the article seems to be to inform, and the apparent purpose may reflect the scope of the newsletter. I'm assuming that the newsletter in which this article appears is, like most elementary school newsletters, prepared mostly for parents of children in the school.

As written, however, the article is aimed at a wider audience than parents, an *audience* that wouldn't have a stake in being an active part of the program. The article just isn't as interesting or as useful to parents as it could be.

The article *must* hook parents, because parents have an important role to play in the project: they can help by reading the books to their children. A better purpose, therefore, would be to explain the program in a way that encourages parents to take a very active role.

These observations about big issues suggest that many changes need to be made in how the article is *organized*. This conclusion means that we will be doing a major editing job; really, a *revision*.

Little issues. One *strength* of the copy is that it does not use nouns to modify other nouns. Only the phrase "Virginia Children's Book Award program" might be improved. Maybe we can improve it; but maybe we can't, since another organization invented it! Other strengths of the writing include the use of conjunctions instead of slashes (/) and the use of unbiased language.

The sentences are about the right length. Sentence length is still a problem, however, because the sentences are all the *same* length. They also follow the *same* declarative structure, a fact that tends to make the article boring. "Boring" writing may be OK for research and scholarship, where, in the name of objectivity, conventions dictate a very colorless style; but it's not OK in newsletters for parents.

More evidence that the research style has seeped into this article can be inferred from its failure to make *direct statements*. It uses the passive voice twice, but more frequently it uses constructions that violate the first good writing habit illustrated on page 6 (i.e., avoiding the "there is" construction). The reality of ordinary life just *isn't* that objective. The writing needs to be lightened up, made more lively, more familiar.

The ninth-grade reading level is also a problem, though the source of the problem is quite clear: words like "participating," "encouraging," "literary," and "eligible." Wordy phrases like "will be participating in" and wordy indirect statements like "the purpose of this award program is to enrich" also contribute substantially to the problem of readability.

Let's see how we might revise this draft. For this exercise, I'll make up facts to cover omissions in the article; in *real* life, of course, you'd be able to find *real* facts.

Second Draft: Rescue

VIRGINIA CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD PROGRAM

White Oak school has bought a set of good children's books. Some of them are books childern--and their parents before them--have really loved: *Homer Price* and *Impunity Jane*, for example.

Children in grades 3-6 to can read these books as part of the Virginia Children's Book Award program. In the program, children vote for their favorite book and author. When the voting is finished, the winning

author will come to Virginia to talk to us.

Each of the teachers in grades three to six will be reading one book aloud in class. Voting takes place in early April. Let us know if you need help.

Only students who have read or *listened to* six of the 19 books can vote. There's enough time between now and the end of March to read some of these books aloud to your children. Mrs. Hensley, in the library, can show you where the books are. Come visit with your child someday after school and check one out.

I hope you will agree that this draft is something of an improvement, though it's obvious that it still needs a lot of work. We've removed the wordy phrases and jargon; we've made direct statements; we've varied sentence length and structure; we've used the names of specific books; we've focused on parental involvement; and we've started to organize the article to reflect that focus. But we haven't taken care of everything; we'll make more progress in another round of editing.

I especially hope that you can see that the organization of the revision still needs some improvement. Some little things--typos ("to can"), capitalization ("White Oak school"), awkward phrases ("Mrs. Hensley, in the library,")--also need work.

Fine-tuning the organization is usually the focus of the next round of editing. The lead (first) sentence seems to need more work; it's a real contrast to the second sentence, which seems to do a better job of attracting the reader's attention. Also, that third paragraph seems to be out of place.

While you're focusing on improving the organization, try to keep your peripheral vision attuned to making those little changes. Let's see what the next draft looks like.

Third Draft: Therapy

VIRGINIA CHILDREN'S BOOK AWARD PROGRAM

White Oak School, thanks to the PTA, was able to buy 19 award-winning children's books. Some of them are books childern--and their parents before them--have really loved: *Homer Price* and *Impunity Jane*, for example.

Children in grades 3-6 can read these books as part of the Virginia Children's Book Award program. In the program, children vote for their favorite book and author. When the voting is finished, the winning author will come to Virginia to talk to us.

Only students who have read or *listened to* six of the

19 books can vote. The books are in the library. Visit Mrs. Hensley with your child someday after school and check one out. There's enough time between now and the end of March to read some of these books aloud to your children.

Each of the teachers in grades three to six will be reading one book aloud in class. Voting takes place in early April. Let us know if you need help.

We seem to be making progress. The organization is perhaps acceptable now, and the lead sentence is somewhat more effective. We've made the little changes we noted above.

But, we're going to take another pass at this article. (If we were wordprocessing, we'd just read through the article one more time and make changes as we went.) As we continue our work, you may notice that we've left out an important detail.

Fourth Draft: Ready to Meet the World

HOW DO YOU GET CHILDREN TO READ GOOD BOOKS?

Thanks to the PTA, we were able to buy 19 award-winning children's books. Some of them are books children—and their parents before them—have really loved: *Homer Price* and *Impunity Jane*, for example. Others are less familiar, but just as good.

We plan to get children in grades 3-6 to read these good books as part of the Virginia Children's Book Award program. In the program, children vote for their favorite book and author. When the voting is finished, the winning author will come to Virginia to talk to us.

There's a catch, however: only students who have read or *listened to* six of the 19 books can vote.

Each of the teachers in grades three to six will read one book *aloud* in class. There's also enough time between now and the end of March for you to read some of these books aloud to *your children*. The books are in the library. Visit Mrs. Hensley with your child someday after school and check one out.

Voting takes place in early April. Call Mrs. Hensley at 731-4023 to reserve books or ask questions. Your child's teacher will also be glad to suggest books that might interest your child. Please let us know if we can help.

READING LEVEL: 6th grade

What did we change? The *title* was the important detail that escaped our attention earlier. If we hadn't taken this last look, we'd probably not have noticed.

Now we're using the title to attract readers' interest. Doing *that* suggested a few changes in the lead sentence: namely, changing from the third person (i.e., "White Oak School") to the first person ("we"). Since the program is a cooperative effort between schools and parents, "we" looks like a better choice than "the school." It implies cooperation at the very beginning of the article.

We revised the third paragraph, and split the revised copy into two paragraphs. The sentence, "There's a catch," is intended to keep the reader moving: we're trying to elicit the response, "Oh yeah, what catch?"

We moved all the copy about *reading aloud* to children (an important detail of the program) to the new fourth paragraph. Note that we pruned the phrase "will be reading" down to "will read." That change yields a *direct statement*. We also added a qualifying statement, "Others are less familiar," to avoid giving our readers the impression that some books might belong to a group of unloved books! Finally, we revised the last sentence, adding practical details, to put the burden of helping on the school staff.

Well, even in this last round of editing, we were able to make big improvements. But we've already given this article a lot more attention than most articles get. It's time to stop.

Let's check the effectiveness of our work by measuring readability. It's acceptable: sixth grade level. We might have done better, but it really is time to let go.

The only step left is proofreading. Let *someone else* do the proofreading if you've been writing and editing. For now, however, see if you can find the glitches in the above draft.

Proofreading Results

There are two glitches: the spelling of "childern" [sic] and the fact that "3-6" is written in numerals the first time, but is spelled out the second time. Maybe you will find others, as well.

Remember

1. Read critically. Think of big issues and little issues.

2. Base your revision, if the article needs to be revised, on your critical reading.

3. Keep purpose, audience, and organization clearly in view as you revise. Follow the five good writing habits on page 6. Prune wordy phrases and jargon, too. See the suggestions on pages 7-8.

4. On the third draft, pay close attention to improving the organization.

5. On the fourth draft, focus on editing details: grammar, diction, style, little improvements that increase effectiveness.

6. The fifth draft is the proofreading draft. Let somebody else do it.

Finally, please understand that no piece of writing can be made perfect, unless a writer has a great deal of time to devote to perfection. And even then, only the writer will be likely to understand the perfection; others will quibble.

Not only don't you have time to strive for that kind of perfection, it's out of place in a newsletter. "Good," "very good," and "excellent" are fine goals for improving the quality of newsletter copy. Most newsletter copy is "fair," and that's a good place to start.